THE HERMIT, THE KNIGHT AND THE
JESTER: A STUDY IN VALUES: BY WALTER
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OCE upon a time there was a nobleman who had three
sons, and when he felt the burden of years resting
heavy upon him, he called them to him and said:
“My sons, the time has come when you must go forth
to seek your fortunes in the world, for I must soon leave
it. I have but a small estate to divide among three,
but there is enough so that each of you may start out
with a coat on his back and silver in his purse. Each of you may
choose his own course, but it will remain for you to prove yourselves
worthy of the honorable name that is handed down to you. I have
endeavored to teach you wisdom, virtue and prudence, but it will
remain for you to decide how you will follow my teachings. For a
young man’s life is in his own keeping after he comes of age, and the
privilege and the responsibility of choosing a career rest with him.
Take time to think it over, my sons, and then come to me for my
blessing.”

Now the eldest son was a man of keen intellect and great virtue.
He saw all about him men striving and dying for wealth and fame.
He had read much of what the ancient sages had taught of the vanity
of the world. So at length he went to his father and said:
“Father, I have chosen my course. I have determined to become
a scholar. I like not the world and its vanities; I like not the sense-
less struggling of men for power; I will withdraw from it and devote
my life to the culture of my mind, but I will not be selfish; when I
have looked long into the hidden things of life I will become wise,
and then I will give to the world of my wisdom, as did the philosophers
of old. I will be a good man as well as a wise one. I will live frugally
and think loftily. By dwelling in the realm of the ideal I will make
myself a great teacher for mankind.”

The father nodded. “Thou art a good son,” quoth he. “May
what thou seekest come to pass. My blessing go with thee.”

So the eldest son took his share of the silver and his books, and
departed.

The second son was a man of vigor and ambition. He looked
about him and saw that some men were great and some small, some
rich and some poor, some surrounded with comfort and some with
misery, some powerful and some puny, some masters and some serv-
ants. Why should a man choose poverty, obscurity and servitude,
if wealth and fame and power were to be won? So he went to his
father and said:
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"Father, I have chosen my course. I have decided to be a soldier. I have a strong arm and I fear nothing. I will fight my way to fame and power. The king shall hear of me, and I shall be raised up so that thou shalt be proud of thy son. And when I am a master of men I will not be cruel, but all men shall look up to me, and I shall be honored in the land."

The father nodded, "Thou art a brave son," quoth he. "May what thou seekest come to pass. My blessing go with thee."

So the second son took his share of the silver and bought a coat of mail, a lance, a sword, a plumed helmet and a coal-black charger, and set off for the wars.

But the youngest son was a gentle youth who loved life as he found it. He hated not the world, nor did he long for power. He would rather laugh than sigh, rather sing than fight. For all that, he was no weakling, and he desired earnestly that his life might be worth the living. For many days he pondered, and then he went to his father and said:

"Father, I cannot choose my course. I am neither a scholar nor a fighter like my brothers. I wish to lead a worthy life and make the world a little better, but I know not how to begin. The King has sent for me to be his jester, because he has heard that I have a ready wit, but a jester is not a man of honor among his brethren. He makes no stir in the world. What shall I do?"

Now the youngest son had his mother's eyes, and his father loved him best of the three. The father gazed at him fondly for a long time, and then said:

"My son, much reading of books may not make a man wise, and much spilling of blood may not make him great. Whosoever a man's heart biddeth, so is he, whether he wear corselet, gown, or motley. Life is a various compound, and the wise man considereth not one ingredient alone. It matters not what garb or what trade a man chooseth, so that he choose also righteousness, honesty, kindness, open-heartedness, simplicity, tolerance, a clean mind, a sweet spirit, a lofty vision and good will toward men. Go to the King and be his jester; it cannot hurt thee while thy soul is in thine own keeping. For it is the life of the soul, not the deeds of the mind or of the arm that counts. My blessing go with thee."

So the third son set forth, very humbly, for the palace of the King; and his father watching him depart rejoiced, for humility is the beginning of greatness.

When twenty years had passed, and the old nobleman slept with his fathers, a traveler from a distant land passed by a hermit's cave in the mountains. He saw the scholar within poring over his books,
and being a student of men the traveler made inquiry as to what manner of man the hermit was. He found that the hermit had gained renown throughout the land as a man of learning, but that no one loved him. Much brooding had made him morose. Much solitude had given him but little understanding of his fellowmen, and they could not understand him. When he tried to teach the people philosophy, he failed. "He is a dreamer," they said.

"A wasted life," quoth the traveler, and passed on.

One day he came to a town where there was a sound of tramping horses, and presently, with much pomp, a troupe of men-at-arms rode by, and all the people stood and gaped after them. At their head rode a knight of forbidding visage, on a coal-black charger.

"Who is that?" inquired the traveler. They told him that the knight was a mighty soldier, who had come back from the wars with much wealth and great renown. But the people did not love him, and when he gave alms he bestowed also fear. Much fighting had hardened his heart. He had climbed to power on the necks of friend and foe. His career had left him no time for the finer things of life.

"A fool for all his greatness," quoth the traveler, and passed on.

At length he came to the city where the King's palace was. And as he paused before the inn, a jester passed, in his silly cap and bells. With the jester were children, begging for a story, and he rebuked them not. An old woman stepped out quickly from a doorway and kissed the jester's hand before he could protest. And as he passed, the people smiled, and there was love and not mockery in the smile.

"Who is that fellow?" asked the traveler.

"That," replied the innkeeper, "is the court fool."

"But do the people love a fool?" inquired the traveler.

"Yea, verily," quoth the publican, and told the traveler many a tale of the King's jester, before the tavern door.

It appeared that the jester, when he was not busy making laughter for the King and his court, had taken to wandering about the town and making laughter for the people. Now laughter is not a thing to be disregarded, and the people came to look for the jester with joy. And soon they learned that beneath his wit lay a fund of homely wisdom, and that beneath his motley beat a Christian heart. And they began to come to him with their troubles, and he tried to show them how they could make their lives better worth while by living at peace with their neighbors and looking out for those things that feed the spirit. They began to look for him as they looked for sunshine after a shower, and he failed them not. And because he was only a jester, and not a great man, he and the people understood each other, and the town was better because he lived in it.
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I am from the East,” quoth the traveler, “and my ways are not your ways. I know not what a jester’s work may be, but I know that I have seen a good man and a wise one. I have traveled far and seen many men of power and learning, wealth and fame and many men who profess much piety; but men of great soul are few. This man has turned his life to account, for the things of the spirit are better than the things of the body or of the mind.”

And the innkeeper, though he comprehended not the full purport of the wise man’s words, nodded, smiling, for he, too, loved the King’s jester.

YOUTH is playtime, and frivolity is condoned in the young; but I believe that the average young man—the everyday American—has more serious thoughts inside his head than he is given credit for, or than he himself would really acknowledge. When we are twenty-one we stand at the threshold of life, about to put away childish things and to become as men. We don’t say much about it, but the thought disturbs us not a little. What of the future? What of our lives?

The majority of young Americans, as soon as they begin to take thought of the future, desire success above all else. But just how to obtain success, and just what success is, puzzles them. Experience has not taught them; they must set sail on faith. Then come the hard knocks, the disillusionings; dreams pale before the pitiless light of day. The struggle between idealism and materialism begins—a struggle bitter and to the death, which no poet has celebrated. No patron gods hover over the battlefield; no glare of trumpet or beat of drum stirs the weary heart to deeds of martial valor. No one cheers; no one knows. But because the fight is universal and vital and because all the future depends upon the outcome, I venture to invade the realm of the commonplace and talk of these things.

When I was twenty-one I left the shelter of college halls, equipped, more or less adequately, with hope, ambition and ideals. With me were the band of my fellows, and we went our several ways to seek our fortunes. Well, it has been a blind sort of a seeking for most of us, and I have sometimes felt that, for all our youthful self-confidence and wilfulness, the way might have been made a little plainer.

The teachers of our youth are all too often men of the study and the cloister, and it is hardly to be expected that non-combatants can successfully teach the art of war. I do not know the remedy for this, but I feel that it is a defect in our educational system. Ideals they taught us—ideals of honor, of altruism, of service, of scholarly and intellectual attainment. For this we thank them. They told
us that these things were the desiderata of life, and that it was our
duty and privilege to be better than our fellowmen, and by our ex-
ample to lead them on to better things.
A delightful feeling of self-complacency this gave us, to be sure,
but it was short-lived. When we left the protection of Alma Mater,
and got into the thick of the struggle for existence, then did the dis-
concerting truth burst upon us that somehow our lofty ideals did not
square with the facts of life as we found them. We discovered that,
with all our degrees and our self-sufficiency, we were but privates in
the army. Over us were captains of tens and captains of hundreds
and somewhere away above them were the great generals. We
seemed a bit handicapped in our mission of purifying society.
When some of the conceit had been knocked out of us, we began
to ask ourselves if we had not made some mistake in judgment and
motive. Perhaps we were on the wrong road, after all. Success
seemed to lie up another street. The crowd seemed to be going
another way—on up the hill of material prosperity. If we changed
our course a bit, we might reach a height where noble deeds would
be possible; there was nothing noble in life in the valley.
And so some of us turned and went with the crowd, and have
become knights of greater or less renown, not without damage to our
immortal souls. And some of us have set our faces against the
stream, and sought some quiet back-water, there to remain, hermit-
like, embittered against this wrong-headed old world. And some,
I hope, have chosen a golden mean, striving, without loss of ideals,
to take life as we find it and make the best of it.
There are things in life that are worth while and things that are
not worth while. I construct this platitude for the sake of an axio-
matic starting-point. If we are at all thoughtful, we desire to attain
to those things that are worth while and to disregard those things
that are not worth while. We are not of those foolish ones who spend
their labor for that which satisfieth not. But it is not always so easy
to determine what things are worth while in life and what are not.
Especially is the answer obscure to the young man of small experience.
It might not be such a bad idea if every final examination paper for
the Bachelor of Arts degree were to bear the question, “What is
worth while in life?” It seems to me I recollect puzzling over ques-
tions less important than that. Let us consider what the correct
answer would be.
I don’t know whether it is deplorable or not, but it is true that
academic idealism and the actualities of life do not jibe. In its
undiluted form this idealism is essentially fallacious. The Brahman
may attain Heaven through contemplation, but not the twentieth-
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century American. Pure idealism fails because it is theoretical. It belongs to the millenium, not to the present. It takes into account a single force; it does not allow for the variations of the needle. But there is a vast difference between ideals and idealism, just as there is between sentiment and sentimentality. It is in the confusion of these that the error lies. No sane man will deplore ideals. They are worth while.

Materialism, on the other hand, is equally fallacious, and for similar reasons. It takes no account of the human soul, and that tells the whole story. And that we have souls is proved by the very fact that these problems perplex us. If we were soulless, we should all be out-and-out materialists or utter fools.

Now, then, we arrive at the fundamental question. How can we nurture our souls, in spite of the materialism about us, without swinging over to ineffectual idealism? How may the practical ambition and the loftier vision be made to work in double harness? How can we find the golden mean—the harmonizing grays in the picture? Those are questions we must answer for ourselves, according to our individual needs and circumstances; but if we have surely formulated the problem in its personal application, we shall have taken a long step toward the goal. The jester in the parable worked it out in his way; you and I must work it out in ours. And it will help us if we study the lives of those men about us who seem truly admirable, for the world is not all bad, and there are tens of thousands who have not bowed the knee to Baal.

For the young man who is choosing a career, the first question is, what is success? There is time enough ahead; let him sit down and consider it. Who is a successful man? Is it Ryan or Rockefeller, with all their wealth? Is it Parson Prayerful, that pious man, whose wife is ashamed of her last year’s bonnet?

All the wise men of all the ages have pointed out the folly of riches. I can add nothing to their scorn. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth” is a maxim for all time and all countries. And yet money is a good servant, though a hard master. Money stands for much that makes life happier. Parson Prayerful’s family would be better off if he could provide a little more of it. It is the glorification of money, and the display of wealth and the blighting power of the quest that starve and warp the soul.

And the very use of money seems to have a contaminating influence sometimes. A Hughes will give up an opportunity to make money for a seat on the Supreme Bench, and we say it is admirable; a Guggenheim will pay out money for a seat in the Senate, and we say it is despicable.
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Money is not to be scorned when it is a good servant. Fame is not to be scorned when it is honestly won. Position is not to be scorned when it is an honorable one. The hermit is a fool for all his learning. It is the slavery to these things that crushes the soul.

These are not profound conclusions, but rather suggestive hints to set the young man thinking. For my object is to give some young man God-speed on the right road. The vast importance of formulating the purpose, defining the ideals, and clarifying the vision in youth, cannot be overestimated. Nine-tenths of life’s actions, say psychologists, depend upon habit. The importance of forming the right habits of thought is self-evident. A false step at the beginning of a career means much labor or disaster later. That youth is wise who early recognizes the importance of his own soul, and who makes an investment in the true and the lofty, as he would start a bank account.

I beg your pardon, my young friend. You do not like preaching; neither do I. But it’s a serious sort of business—this making the best of it—even for a jester, and it pays to look life in the face now and then, and get acquainted with it. And if we do not cramp our souls with sordid aims, and if we do not shut out the world from our souls because we disapprove of it, we can find much that is good in life—good people, good books and beauty everywhere. We mustn’t neglect our souls, that’s all. And don’t be discouraged if the world seems obstinate and does not respond to your efforts to reform it. Try helping some one person toward the richer life; it’s easier and more satisfactory.

I knew a man once, who was, as I look back upon his life, a success. He was a newspaper editor in a small New England city, and his salary needed much nursing to provide for the needs of his family. His life was not an easy one, and there were heart-wearying things in it; but he was known as a man of laughter and sunshine. He was, too, a man of intellect and wisdom, and in his youth he had dreams of literary achievement, I believe. Circumstances deprived him of the realization of those dreams, and he never won what he deserved. And yet, I say, his life was not in vain, for through it all his soul grew large and kind. He loved beauty, and the roses in his yard bloomed for him as though they felt the virtue of his touch. His heart was a fountain of perpetual youth, and he helped people to laugh and to sing. He did good deeds, and stood for truth and right in his community. He drew to him the love of men and the gratitude of women, and when he died there was mourning in other homes than his own.

I think I would prefer a little more of the ease of life than he had. It is less difficult for the soul to grow in the broad sunshine. And yet I think I would like to be something like him, if I could.